

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

May 2002

Book Review: *Dream a Little: Land and Social Justice in Modern America* by Dorothee E. Kocks.

Betsy Downey
Gonzaga University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Downey, Betsy, "Book Review: *Dream a Little: Land and Social Justice in Modern America* by Dorothee E. Kocks." (2002). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 29.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/29>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 2002).

Published by the Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Copyright © 2000 Center for Great Plains Studies. Used by permission.

Dream a Little: Land and Social Justice in Modern America. By Dorothee E. Kocks. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Notes, bibliographic essay, index. xx + 255 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

In the beginning was land. Lots of land. "Before there was a welfare state, there was a frontier state," which distributed land in hopes of ending poverty. *Dream a Little* explores what Dorothee Kocks calls the "geographic embrace": the dream that nature has a moral function and offers "a blueprint to a good society." The first part of her book examines the frontier state, finding many similarities with the welfare state. Most Americans seem blind to the parallels, believing that nature and land are good; land is a "birthright," and a homestead is not a handout. "Asking for land is not asking for welfare."

The geographic embrace has become firmly embedded in American myths and historical writing, but the frontier state did not achieve a model society. Examining "the range war between historians," Kocks acknowledges that Old Western historians ignore many flaws and failures. On the other hand, many New Western de-mythologizers go too far in rejecting the geographic embrace. Some, like Kocks herself, continue to "lean into" it, still looking to the land for a better society.

In the second part of *Dream a Little*, Kocks has "conversations with three women" who "profoundly resonated with me": Mari Sandoz,

Josephine Johnson, and Ella Baker. Authors Sandoz and Johnson were rooted in place and had strong attachments to the land. They wrote about the failures of the geographic embrace, but they also leaned into it. Civil rights activist Ella Baker's connection lies in her emphasis on local community building. Kocks concludes with her own "re-visioning" of human geography. Fluid rather than defined, it looks toward transnational communities, changing yet "highly attuned to their situation in place and time."

Kocks's style is subjective and feminist. She explains at one point that she is "twisting words out of their driven tracks." The book reflects her attraction to "poetic versus linear, metaphorical logic as against other kinds; the creation of new ideas . . . on the same page." Though she avoids the specialized language of postmodernism, the word twisting can be bothersome, particularly using "geography, land, landscape and nature nearly interchangeably." Kocks brings to almost every page a variety of authors and ideas—from John Lennon to Michel Foucault, from laissez-faire liberalism to the new geography. Many connections are clearer to author than to reader.

Some parts of the book work better than others. The second part is the more focused, though the section on Baker is weak. Kocks's blend of analysis and personal memoir works best with Johnson. Her treatment of Sandoz is good, but lacks the depth of understanding and research she brings to Johnson; her personal reflections adds little.

Dream a Little is not for everyone. As Kocks explains, it requires the reader "to invent my book with me." For those willing to do so, *Dream a Little* offers readers new ways of looking at the American West, its literature, and their own ideas.

BETSY DOWNEY
Department of History
Gonzaga University